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In sickness, as in health

Adopting a cat with medical issues requires a good deal of thought, education and heart, plus a real bond

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Give these cats a chance. Maybe one of these cats is that special fit. Wendi Rekers, Vet, Cat Adoption Team

Pets/Special-needs adoptions

I don't know about you, but my body isn't exactly perfect. At the risk of telling you more than you want to know, I do better when I don't eat wheat. Some of the people I care about most have more serious problems. My brother has diabetes. A man I know with the kindest heart imaginable has coronary disease.

It's a good thing we aren't cats. If we were, no one would want to adopt us. People who work in shelters are asking imperfect people like us to take a chance on kitties with manageable medical needs.

Take Miss America. Please. She's waiting for a home at the Cat Adoption Team shelter in Sherwood. She is just as gorgeous as her name implies, all soft fur and purrs. This Miss America could also win Miss Congeniality: She's one friendly kitty who loves to play; she entertains herself batting at toys. Unlike many beauty pageant winners, this pretty girl isn't even high maintenance: All she needs to keep her happy and well is a simple prescription diet to keep her food allergies at bay.

The last little detail presents a problem for prospective adopters.

"For some reason, prescription diets are a big turnoff," says veterinarian Wendi Rekers, chief of veterinary staff at the Cat Adoption Team. She notes that the canned food that Miss America and other cats with allergies need costs about the same as any other good-quality cat food.

"As long as these cats are on their diet of hypoallergenic food, they usually do fine forever," she says.

To be fair, not all medical issues are so simple. But for the right adopter, those problems don't have to disqualify a cat from consideration. Next time you check out a potential new feline family member, here are some things to think about:

Look for personality first. There is a magic that happens when the right person meets that certain animal. - There is a profound recognition that almost screams, "That's my cat!" and "That's my human!" It's a connection of spirit that transcends the appearance, age and sometimes even the health of the cat.

Don't preclude meeting a cat just because the kitty may have a manageable health issue, pleads Rekers. "Give these cats a chance. Maybe one of these cats is that special fit," she says.

Susan Field knows about that kind of special fit. She's the public information officer for the Bonnie Hays Small Animal Shelter in Hillsboro. She instantly recalled a cat who followed her home -- 30 years ago: "It was a clear January night, and my husband and I had just seen our first falling star together."

They dubbed the kitty who seemed to appear from nowhere at that very moment Comet. He was so sick that the veterinarian recommended he be euthanized, but instead Field and her husband nursed him back to health. He lived for 13 happy years with them. Field still has Comet's photo on her desk at work. "He was like a falling star who came from heaven," she says, her voice still full of love for her long-ago kitty.

Ask questions. Love alone isn't enough. Some medical problems just take minor management, but some take more serious intervention. Almost every shelter will allow you to place a hold on a cat so you can go home and think about the pros and cons.

Take the time to do your homework. Ask the volunteers and staff about the cat's condition and its prognosis.

For example, some cats with diabetes may require shots, although others can be managed with special diets.

Some diseases require special homes. Some shelters will adopt out cats with FIV, a disease that's similar to AIDS in humans. Most FIV-positive cats are males who contracted the disease from a bite from another cat. These kitties need to go to indoor-only homes, without other cats, to ensure they don't infect others. "FIV cats can do quite well for years and years and years," says Rekers. She says lots of people opt to adopt two FIV cats together, so they have a buddy. The FIV virus dies almost instantly outside of the cat and poses no danger to future cats who may live in the house or to people.

The bottom line: If you find an appealing cat with a medical condition, learn all you can. Talk with your veterinarian. Look up information on the Internet. Go into the adoption with your eyes open, and make sure it's something you can handle.

Open your heart. "What we're searching for is the person with a much bigger heart than the average adopter," says Mike Oswald, Multnomah County director of animal services. "The kittens and outgoing young cats find homes in a heartbeat. We need people who take the geriatric cat or the animal in failing health."

The secret is that the favor is returned countless times over. Anyone who has ever adopted an animal knows with absolute certainty that animals know when they have been saved. That's even more true for animals who need something extra.

"These animals know they need help and they bond that much closer with their caregivers," says David Lytle, the public information manager at the Oregon Humane Society. He and his wife took in a kitten they feared wouldn't live. Now they have a saucy, healthy lap cat. "We have a lifelong bond that I couldn't replace with any other animal. When you take in a cat that's sickly and you nurse it back to health, it treats you differently than anyone else. It's a two-way street."

The human Miss America wins the beauty pageant lottery and has a wide world open to her. The kitty Miss America, and all the others like her, want to win the cat version of the lottery -- a warm, loving home and some catnip toys. The Miss America who's waiting for a home at the Cat Adoption Team doesn't need an entourage and isn't even looking for endorsements. Her only requirement is a hypoallergenic diet to keep her well.

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